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The Erskine Fire and Public-Lands Management in the American West

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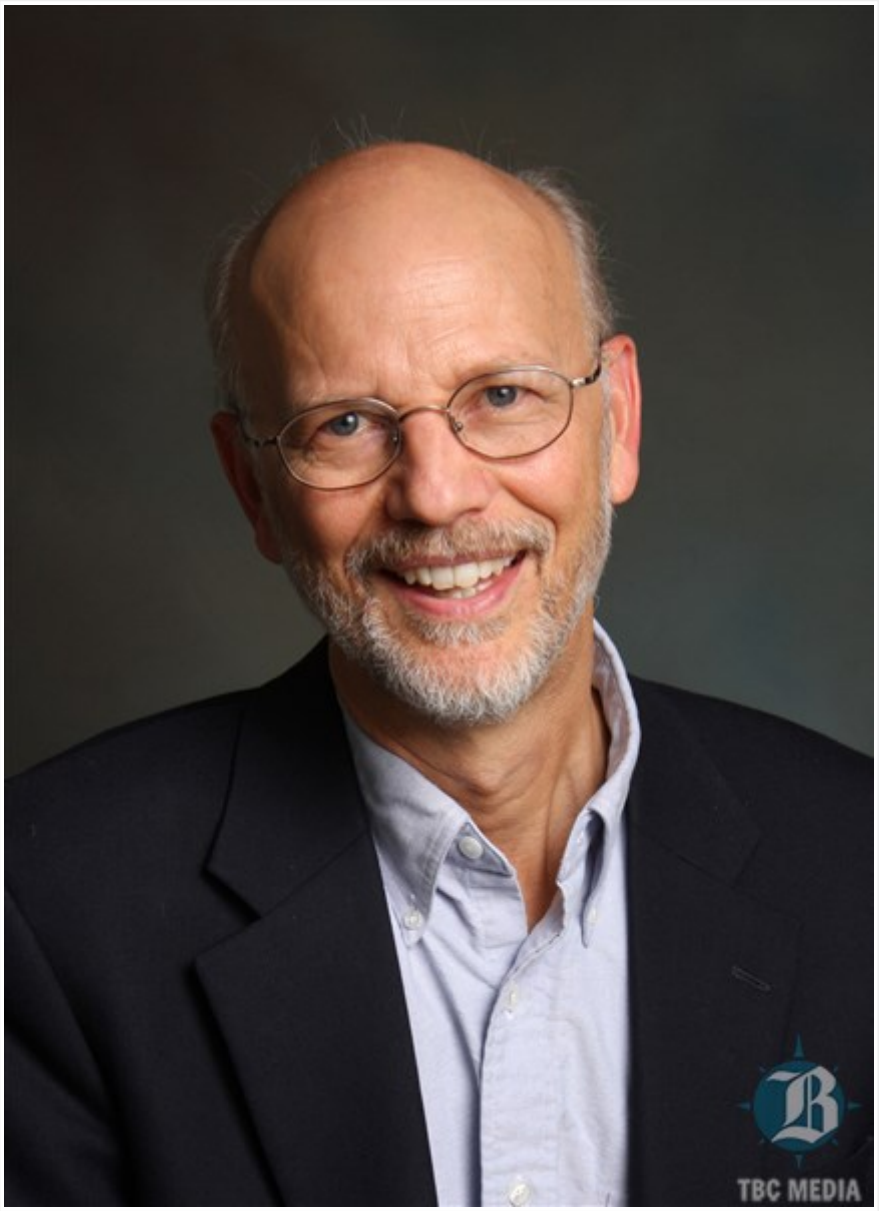

Char Miller directs the Environmental Analysis Program at Pomona College and is author of "America's Great National Forests" (2016).

The Erskine Fire is big, fast and dangerous. Its power is evident in the tragic loss of life, the incineration of an estimated 150 structures and its rapid growth — more than 36,000 acres burned in its first 30 hours.

More evidence: hundreds of firefighters on the ground and in the air are struggling to get ahead of the inferno. In the words of Kern County Fire Chief Brian Marshall: these men and women "have been engaged in a firefight of epic proportions trying to save every structure possible."

Epic the Erskine Fire surely is; it's frightening, too. "We've had lots of big incidents," said Captain Mike Nicholas of the Kern County force. "This one's pretty bad though."

But it is not unprecedented.

Indeed, the Erskine's high-intensity flames, breakneck speed and erratic behavior are perfectly consistent with how large fires have always behaved in the southern Sierras.

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JOSE GASPAR: Erskine Fire brings out human connections (/Columnists/2016/07/03/JOSE-GASPAR-Erskine-Fire-brings-out-human-connections.html)

Ecologists know that high-intensity, mixed-severity fires have been the norm in the Sierra for millennia. Many of the landscape's key species — trees and shrubs — are fire-dependent or fire-adapted. Without fire, these forests would not exist.

George B. Sudworth of the U.S. Division of Forestry (forerunner of the U.S. Forest Service) encountered some of this historic evidence of fire when at the turn of the 20th Century he inspected the southern Sierras. Everywhere he went, he encountered evidence of a fire-scarred terrain: big and small, in high-elevation pine forests and chaparral-cloaked foothills; in canyons and on ridgelines.

The more recent scarring had a different source. Sudworth blamed shepherds, miners and loggers for fires that in some cases had been intentionally set; others that were the result of pre-Smoky Bear carelessness. Many of the region's residents apparently could have cared less: "it was all public land," E.W. Maslin said in 1889, "and what is everybody's business is nobody's business."

That indifference was no longer true in the 1940s. Consider the other Erskine Fire in Kern County, which blew up 74 years ago. On June 19, 1942, this blaze ignited outside the Sequoia National Forest, then, fueled by high winds, low humidity and searing heat, raced across 51,000 acres — mostly chaparral and grass.

Those same weather conditions were critical to the growth and spread of three more fires the next month. The Rancheria Fire consumed nearly 6,000 acres; the Fish Hatchery Fire took out more than 23,000 acres; and the aptly named Stormy Canyon Fire, which an arsonist touched off, burned upwards of 21,000 acres. Exhausted fire crews and anxious residents, though they may have been far from the front lines of World War II, suffered their own form of battle fatigue.

That month-long swarm of conflagrations was significant for two reasons, fire historian Robert Cermak observes in "Fire in the Forest: A History of Forest Fire Control on the National Forests of California" (2005). The 1942 fire season "proved to be the worst in the history of the Sequoia National Forest," and the climate-driven character of these explosive fires testified to the "controlling role that weather plays in fire control in the Golden State."

His insight remains true as we witness yet another massive fire sweep across the baked-dry southern Sierra. The 2016 Erskine Fire, for all its ferocity, is part of an enduring pattern that makes the Sierra the Sierra.

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